

## Permissible Christmas Activities

It's that time of year! The lists below are, of necessity, generalizations. If a public school administrator has a question about a more specific activity, the administrator is encouraged to contact his/her school attorney.

*Student prayer.* As is true of any time of the year, individual or collective student prayer is permissible so long as the prayer does not disrupt or impede the educational mission of the district. (For instance, students cannot organize a prayer group which skips math class to pray.) The corollary to this is that any prayer led by or at the behest of a public school official is in violation of the First Amendment.

*Secular aspects of Christmas.* The non-religious aspects of Christmas may be part of students' lives at school to the extent that they do not otherwise violate school rules. For example, the following are permissible activities (inasmuch as they do not violate the First Amendment):

- Hanging pictures of reindeer, bells, other non-religious symbols.
- Sponsoring a "giving tree" on which students may hang hats, mittens, scarves, other items for donation to less fortunate persons.
- Handing out candy. [Remember, this does not violate either the First Amendment or state nutrition guidelines (if not provided by the school; check to see if it would violate a local school wellness policy!)]
- Sponsoring sleigh rides.

*Class parties.* Focus on the secular side of Christmas. Excuse all children whose families object to celebrating Christmas in any way, both those families who are of other faiths and those who are Christian, but who find the commercial aspects of the holiday to be offensive.

*Caroling.* Again, if the songs are secular ("*Jingle Bells*," "*Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*," "*Sleigh Ride*," etc.) in nature, there is nothing about singing them that violates the First Amendment. Songs that celebrate the birth of the Christ are more problematic. In an end-of-the-year music program open to the public, religious songs may be included as selections, as long as they are selected for their musicality and are not limited to Christian-themed songs.

*Displays.* Aside from the utter schizophrenic nature of displays that commingle nativity scenes with Santa, displays that do not overemphasize the religious side of Christmas have been ruled by courts to not violate the First Amendment. Nativity scenes standing alone have been struck down by the courts.

*Christmas trees.* There is nothing sectarian about a "Christmas" tree. (Go ahead...show me where the New Testament refers to it!) The tree is not the problem. The ornamentation could be. Make sure that the ornaments are not all (or not primarily) representative of the Christian faith. Better yet, see "*Secular aspects of Christmas*" above.

*Greetings.* Staff and students alike are free to wish each other a sincere "Merry Christmas," "Happy Hanukkah," "Joyous Kwanzaa," etc., and *they may do so within the walls of a public school building*. The holidays are a time for exercising goodwill toward all. It is not a time for Scrooges or Grinches. Go forth and be merry with due consideration for all. Ho, ho, ho.